

Rules of the Game

Constructs (Part One)

By Skip Williams



The cast of villains in the **D&D** game includes a host of creatures that range from the familiar, such as animals and humanoids, to the utterly alien, such as aberrations and undead.

Constructs fit into the unfamiliar end of the spectrum. Many players and DMs have some difficulty understanding what makes these creatures tick (though few constructs literally tick). The addition of living constructs in *Monster Manual III* clouds the picture further. This month, we'll work on demystifying the construct creature type. We'll start with a few basics.

What Is Creature?

A construct is a kind of creature. According to the glossary in the *Player's Handbook*, a **creature** is a living or otherwise active being that is not an object. Unfortunately, the glossary doesn't include an entry for objects. So what's the difference between a creature and an object? The *Monster Manual* glossary gives us a clue. A creature has both a **Charisma** score, which gives it self-awareness, and a **Wisdom** score, which gives it perception. In the **D&D** game, perception and self-awareness come as a set -- you don't have one without the other. Anything that lacks Charisma and Wisdom scores is an object, not a creature. In this case, self-awareness can be rudimentary. In game terms, anything capable of distinguishing between itself and that which is not itself to any degree at all is self-aware.

Philosophers can argue about whether the **D&D** game's method of distinguishing between creatures and objects is valid, but the definition works for game purposes.

It's worth noting that in the **D&D** game, some objects are alive and some creatures are not. A tree, for example, is a living thing. It lacks a Charisma and a Wisdom score, however, and is an object. The **D&D** game teems with unliving creatures, including undead and constructs.

It's also worth noting that you can mimic perception. For example, a trap that fires an arrow when someone trips a wire could be said to have a limited ability to perceive intruders. In game terms, however, true perception requires a Wisdom score (and consequentially a Charisma score).

From page 312 of the *Monster Manual*:

Nonabilities: Some creatures lack certain ability scores. These creatures do not have an ability score of 0--they lack the ability altogether. The modifier for a nonability is +0. Other effects of nonabilities are detailed below.

Strength: Any creature that can physically manipulate other objects has at least 1 point of Strength. A creature with no Strength score can't exert force, usually because it has no physical body (a spectre, for example) or because it doesn't move (a shrieker). The creature automatically fails Strength checks. If the creature can attack, it applies its Dexterity modifier to its base attack bonus instead of a Strength modifier.

Dexterity: Any creature that can move has at least 1 point of Dexterity. A creature with no Dexterity score can't move (a shrieker, for example). If it can perform actions (such as casting spells), it applies its Intelligence modifier to initiative checks instead of a Dexterity modifier. The creature automatically fails Reflex saves and Dexterity checks.

Construct Traits

The *Monster Manual* glossary includes a brief entry stating what distinguishes a construct from another kind of creature. Here are a few notes to flesh out the glossary entry.

Artificial Beings: An object animated with the *animate objects* spell is a construct. So are most creatures that are built through some artificial means rather than bred, cloned, sprouted, or created through any natural process.

Not all artificial creatures are constructs. Spells such as *animate dead* and *create undead* produce undead creatures, not constructs. The *simulacrum* spell creates a duplicate of some other creature and the duplicate has the same creature type as the original. In general, a construct is a unique kind of creature, not a previously existing creature brought back from death or an attempt to copy another creature. A construct also usually is built up, piece by piece (except in the case of an animated object) from inert materials.

Unassailable Mind: Many constructs have no Intelligence scores and no minds. This gives them immunity to all mind-affecting effects (charms, compulsions, phantasms, patterns, and morale effects). Constructs that have Intelligence scores effectively have minds hardwired into their bodies -- their minds aren't subject to outside manipulation and they have the same immunities that mindless constructs have.

Unliving: A construct is not alive. It has no Constitution score and it has no biological processes to disrupt (or to sustain it, either). This gives a construct several benefits and a few drawbacks.

Constructs don't eat, sleep, or breathe, and most constructs cannot do any of these things. One could, however, build a construct that can mimic these activities.

Constructs lack nervous systems, circulatory systems, and vital organs. As a consequence, a construct isn't subject to poison, sleep effects, paralysis, stunning, disease, death effects, and necromancy effects. A construct also is not subject to critical hits, nonlethal damage, ability damage, ability drain, fatigue, exhaustion, or energy drain. The rules don't say so, but a construct also cannot be nauseated or sickened. A living construct can use the run action, but doing so will tire it out, as noted on page 144 in the *Player's Handbook*. A living construct suffers all the normal effects of a forced march (see page 164 in the *Player's Handbook*). A regular construct can run or force march without tiring.

Constitution: Any living creature has at least 1 point of Constitution. A creature with no Constitution has no body (a spectre, for example) or no metabolism (a golem). It is immune to any effect that requires a Fortitude save unless the effect works on objects or is harmless. For example, a zombie is unaffected by any type of poison but is susceptible to a *disintegrate* spell. The creature is also immune to ability damage, ability drain, and energy drain, and automatically fails Constitution checks. A creature with no Constitution cannot tire and thus can run indefinitely without tiring (unless the creature's description says it cannot run).

Intelligence: Any creature that can think, learn, or remember has at least 1 point of Intelligence. A creature with no Intelligence score is mindless, an automaton operating on simple instincts or programmed instructions. It has immunity to mind-affecting effects (charms, compulsions, phantasms, patterns, and morale effects) and automatically fails Intelligence checks. Mindless creatures do not gain feats or skills, although they may have bonus feats or racial skill bonuses.

Wisdom: Any creature that can perceive its environment in any fashion has at least 1 point of Wisdom. Anything with no Wisdom score is an object, not a creature. Anything without a Wisdom score also has no Charisma score.

Charisma: Any creature capable of telling the difference between itself and things that are not itself has at least 1 point of Charisma. Anything with no Charisma score is an object, not a creature. Anything without a Charisma score also has no Wisdom score.

The lack of any biological activity in a construct's body leaves it immune to any effect that requires a **Fortitude save** unless the effect also works on objects or is harmless. When dealing with a spell, see the spell's area, target, or effect entry to determine if the spell affects objects. See the spell's **saving throw** and **spell resistance** entries to determine if the spell is harmless. [Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions](#) contains further notes on determining what a spell can affect.

A construct's unliving body cannot heal damage on its own unless the construct also has the fast healing special quality. However, one could repair damage to a construct through the Craft Construct feat (see below). The various **cure wounds spells** from the *Player's Handbook* don't work on constructs. Specific spells or effects noted in the construct's description can restore **hit points** a construct has lost. For example, fire heals damage an iron golem has suffered. Certain arcane spells, such as the *repair damage* spells from the *Complete Arcane*, also can remove damage from a construct.

A living creature's body is subject to premature death if it suffers a massive shock or injury sufficient to disrupt its biological functions. In the **D&D** game, the death from **massive damage** rule (see page 145 in the *Player's Handbook*) represents this vulnerability. A living creature also has the ability to cling to life and recover from wounds that render it nonfunctional. The rules for death and dying (see pages 145-146 in the *Player's Handbook*) represent this capacity.

A construct's hit points represent its body's total ability to withstand punishment and keep functioning. It has no biological functions to disrupt, but it also has nothing to keep it hovering on death's door when badly injured. It is not subject to the death from massive damage rule; however, it is immediately destroyed (broken into junk) when reduced to 0 hit points or less.

Since it was never alive, a construct cannot be raised or resurrected.

Mass Equals Hit Points: Destroying a construct requires smashing so much of its structure that it literally falls apart. A construct gains bonus hit points based on size, as shown on page 307 in the *Monster Manual*.

Standard Senses: All constructs in the **D&D** game can see unless otherwise noted in their descriptions. Vision is either built into the construct or magically bestowed through the spell or ritual that animates it. All constructs have **low-light vision** and **darkvision** with a range of 60 feet. The rules don't say so, but it's a reasonable assumption that a typical construct sees at least as well as typical human does when it does not have to rely on low-light vision or darkvision.

Constructs have no special ability or inability to hear sounds, and it's reasonable to assume that a construct hears at least as well as a human unless its description says otherwise.

Constructs don't eat, so it's a pretty good bet they don't have a sense of taste or smell.

A construct's immunity to critical hits and death from massive damage suggests that it doesn't have much of a sense of pain, though a construct with an Intelligence score probably has some way to assess how much damage it has suffered. Likewise, a construct also probably doesn't have much sense of touch. It probably can recognize some textures. I imagine a construct probably can feel about as well as a human wearing a pair of household work gloves.

What's Next?

That covers the basics of constructs. Next week, we'll examine making and repairing constructs. We'll also consider how constructs act during encounters.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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